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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000585

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: ANOTHER CABINET SHAKEUP EXPECTED

REF: A. AMMAN 571

[B](#). AMMAN 187

[C](#). 04 AMMAN 6160

Classified By: Charge David Hale, Reasons 1.4 (B) & (D)

[1](#). (C) Summary. The three-month old cabinet's non-performance has sparked speculation about another shakeup soon, possibly to include a change of prime ministers. While PM Fayez's limitations are self-evident, a likely successor is not. Rumors in elite west Amman focus on intelligence chief Khayr or Royal Court Minister Rifai for the role. While both bring as many liabilities as advantages, this trend in speculation reflects the fact that a) those are the two predominant voices around the King and b) their harder-line view toward the political opposition (reftel A) prevails. The irony is that while the King wants a cabinet that can manage parliament, the poor talent pool in the house keeps him from making the otherwise obvious choice of an MP to lead the next government. The long-term solution requires more fundamental reform of parliament and the political process. But the immediate reaction will be to go slowly. End summary.

[2](#). (C) Only three months old, the reshuffled Fayez cabinet is already facing widespread handicapping of its longevity, with most bets we hear placed on a March/April termination. The speculation in part arises from salon boredom, in part from recognition that cabinet shuffles and changes are a frequent device of Jordanian kings, but most significantly from the plain evidence that the government is a dud. It was widely hoped that the October reshuffle would strengthen the hand of the cabinet's reformers. In fact the appointment of a number of small-bore East Bank figures, aimed at appealing to various factions close to the Prime Minister, has if anything sharpened the division in the cabinet between traditionalists and reformists. One reforming minister told us that last week only three cabinet colleagues joined him in voting support for a package of draft laws needed to implement the good governance initiative spearheaded by Deputy Prime Minister Muasher.

[3](#). (C) If the reformers fare so poorly in cabinet ) and with an initiative clearly blessed by the King ) how can the government succeed in getting its legislation through parliament, critics ask? In fact, the cabinet may have been reflecting an assessment that the legislation is too ambitious for a parliament that wants to be loyal to the King, but not at the price of reforming away the tools of patronage, tribal favoritism, protection from economic competition, and limited women's rights ) all the traditional furnishings that comprise the known world to a remarkably conservative group of MPs.

[4](#). (C) The looming test is the government's budget, submitted to parliament two weeks ago (reftel B). Some observers believe parliament will reject the bill not because of any substantive objections, but as an assertion of parliamentary power. Multiple non-binding recommendations to last year's budget bill went unheeded by the government, angering many MPs. A provisional law designed to strengthen women's rights met this fate last year as several MPs cast their opposing votes solely to spite the government, not necessarily because they opposed the legislation (reftel C). Parliamentary dynamics are driven by four competing blocs, the Islamic Action Front (with a clear philosophy and policy line) and three secular groups which are vehicles for the personal ambitions of their leaders but are otherwise indistinguishable to the outside observer. On almost any given issue, a marriage of convenience emerges between the IAF and one or more of the secular blocs, in opposition to the government. Apart from the budget and the new reform bills, there are more than 150 temporary laws still awaiting consideration, many of which laid the foundation for Jordan's WTO and FTA agreements. Their passage requires mobilization of the cabinet, a task which seems beyond Fayez, ministers. One difficulty the government faces is the legacy of its own behavior. Last year's budget passed only after significant, direct cash payments were made to members. With this vote-buying precedent set, the cabinet now faces the ever-inflating demands of MPs for more. Earlier this month, the PM announced an undistinguished list of dozens of sub-cabinet appointments, which seemed to mark a return to East Bank cronyism as a substitute for good governance ) a step which discouraged the reformers but is unlikely to impress parliament.



15. (C) Further fueling speculation is the sense that the King is losing patience with Fayez. Although averse to challenging personally his close associates (among whom Fayez once numbered), and philosophically inclined toward longer government tenures to improve performance, Abdullah does show in private signs of being fed up. In November, he told Charge that if ministers did not show performance within three months, they'd be out. The three month mark has been reached, and the PM himself has little to show. The difficulty, of course, is that a decision to sack a prime minister must also entail a decision on a successor. The options are not enticing. Each factional leader in parliament may think his behavior shows that as prime minister he could deliver parliament, but in fact their obstructionism and self-promotion makes them improbable candidates. Jordan's elder statesmen, who gave King Hussein a set of plausible choices depending on domestic trends, have largely been cashiered. Furthermore, they are out of step with the King's swift, results-oriented style and suffer other generational liabilities. Two leading cabinet reformers, the (Christian) Deputy Prime Minister Muasher and the (Palestinian) Planning Minister Awadallah suffer sectarian burdens, and neither would be able to improve on the government's performance in pushing through legislation.

16. (C) This hypothetical process of elimination leaves the King with a choice between his two closest advisors at the moment, GID chief Saad Khayr and Royal Court Minister Samir al-Rifai. Khayr brings a proven reputation for telling people what to do, and getting them to do it. However, regardless of Khayr's actual behavior, the selection of the head of the security services would signal at best a lack of conviction in political liberalization. While the title of Prime Minister would appeal to Khayr's vanity, in many ways it would not be a real promotion (and, for the conspiracy minded, therefore all the more enticing for the King, who has brought the ambitious Khayr down a peg or two in recent months). He should be able to manage parliament more successfully than Fayez, but in a way which would move the country away from the reform vista. Rifai's inheritance (he is the third generation of a family that has built its fortunes ) political and otherwise -- on loyal service to the Hashemites) and smooth performance make him an almost inevitable prime minister, like father and grandfather. He is the single Jordanian most reflective of the King's thinking, and as royal court minister he has in fact taken over management of the cabinet when ministers have strayed from the King's desires or common sense. But he may be the first to realize that successfully maneuvering the anteroom politics of the palace is not sufficient seasoning for the prime ministry ) and there is the cautionary example of Fayez himself, who made a similar move from Court Minister to PM. More executive, ministerial experience would be the logical next step for Rifai.

17. (C) As happened last fall, the King may seek sweeping changes out of frustration, but his limited options may bring him around to extending Fayez, political life. This will reinforce the tendency of the palace and GID to do the cabinet's job for it, reinforcing the paradox of Jordan's palace-led reform. Jordan has a shallow pool of political talent. The long-term solution to this problem, as it is to a number of others here, is to open up the political system and permit real parliamentary politics. Unfortunately, in the near term the regime seems more likely to use the dearth of talent as a reason to go slowly. Baghdad minimize considered.

HALE